



Avid Diva II SP

I'm an unrepentant fan of UK firm Avid's turntables – so much so that after I'd reviewed the Avid Diva II four or so years ago, there was no going back: I had to buy one. That deck, with an OL Encounter tonearm, has served me well as one of my record deck references ever since.

Not long after I'd purchased the Diva II, Avid released an SP version, promising even higher levels of performance, thanks to a number of technical upgrades compared to the normal version.

The key updates included swapping

out the II's MDF platter for a heavier, machined aluminium version, fitting a twin-belt drive system, and providing more precise (and adjustable) speed adjustment and control of the synchronous motor using a DSP control unit.

The rest of the Diva II package remains as is: the triangular cast aluminium chassis, the inverted stainless steel bearing, and the tungsten carbide/sapphire thrust point are carried over, as is the 24 motor, and the three-point, triple-layer elastomer suspension.

Four years later, I've finally managed to lay my hands on a Diva II SP – by buying

one. And as much as the purchase was a leap of faith, based on my experience with the II, I'm happy to report that the SP is every bit as good as I'd hoped.

Unpacking and setting up the SP is almost as easy as it is for the II. I say almost, because the twin-drive pulley system requires a bit more care and practice than the single-belt Diva II. A belt locator is provided for that purpose, but it's a lot more fiddly to get right than the manual suggests!

There is no suspension or height adjustment, so ensuring that the deck is positioned on a level surface is paramount.



The freestanding synchronous motor is placed adjacent to the turntable's chassis, utilising a cutaway provided for that purpose.

The hefty, 6,3 kg aluminium platter is carefully located on the bearing, with the belt locator letting the twin belts latch onto the drive hub on the bottom of the platter. A cork mat comes fitted over the platter, while a well-weighted screw-down clamp positively locates the record on the platter.

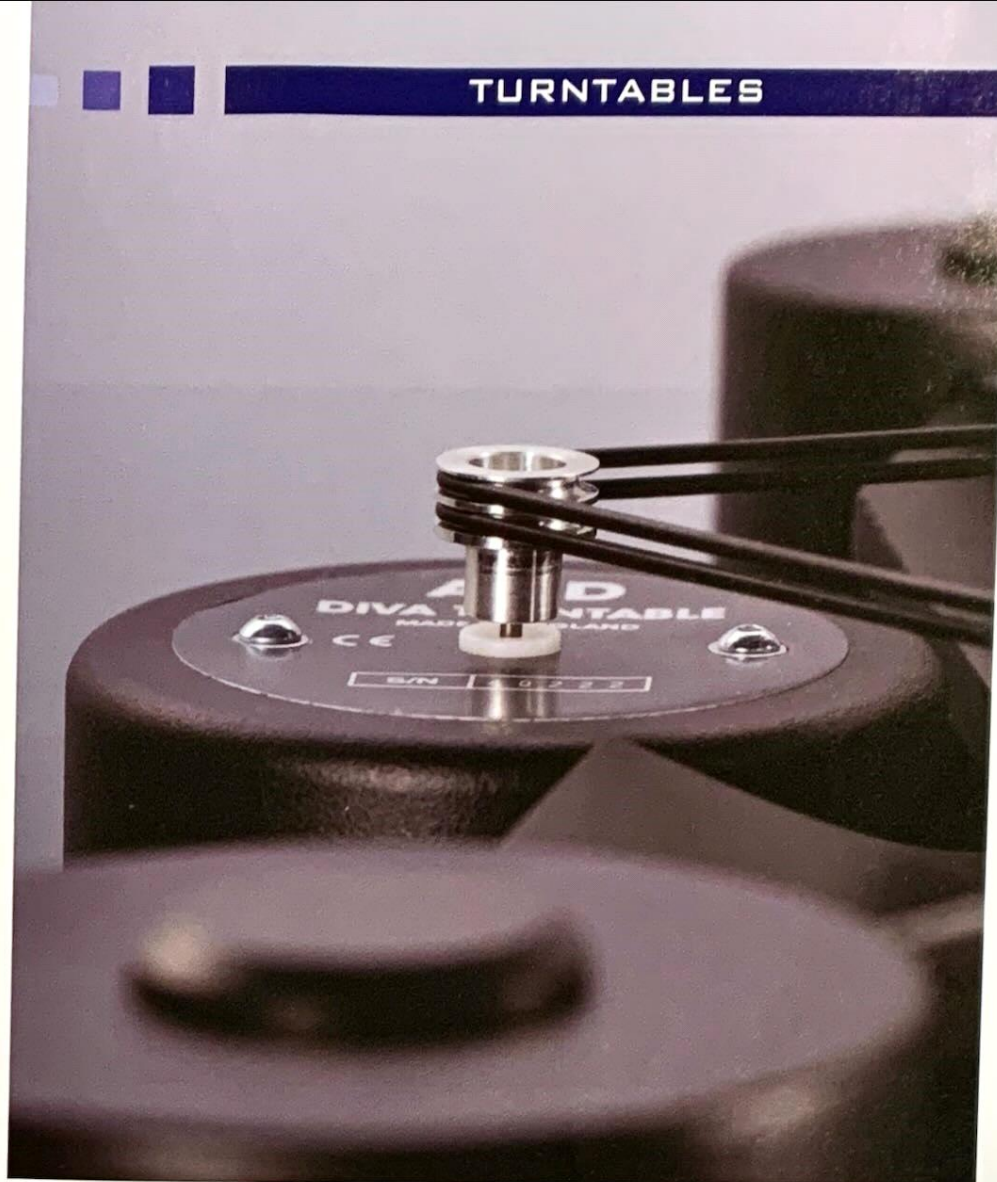
The Diva II SP can be fitted with any number of tonearms, but it comes pre-configured for SME arms, with the 309 the recommended choice. It seemed ill-advised to stray from a tried and trusted recipe, so I ordered the table with the 309, which arrived in a separate box, and had to be installed.

Fortunately, that process was relatively simple, and adjusting the arm once fitted didn't take long, either. The SME is a masterpiece of British precision engineering (a bit like the Avid gear) which explains why they're so well matched.

Anyone serious about vinyl and turntables will agree that set-up is everything, and that small variances in VTA (vertical tracking angle) and stylus azimuth can have a major impact on sound quality. The comments here assume that the deck, tonearm and cartridge are all as perfectly aligned as is humanly possible.

Talking of cartridge, I've been running a Van Den Hul The Frog MC during a prolonged running-in process for the deck/arm/cartridge combination. The Frog has ended up being an excellent choice, with a good mix of weight, presence and expressiveness.

For the first week or so, I felt that the Diva II SP sounded smooth and articulate (and yes, similar to my earlier Diva II in terms of space and imaging), but somehow lacking in real substance. Even when I swapped out the Frog for another of my cartridge regulars, an Ortofon Cadenza Black, the table/arm still didn't offer quite the grip and insight I'd expected.



VITAL STATS

Motor	AC synchronous, 24 Volt, separate control unit
Drive	Dual-belt
Platter	Machined aluminium, 6,3 kg
Bearing	Inverted stainless steel, sapphire/tungsten carbide thrust point
Suspension	Three-point sorbothane-cushioned damping
Tonearm	SME 309
Dimensions	380 x 340 mm footprint, 140 mm high
Weight	12,8 kg

PRICE..... R42 000 without arm or cartridge

VERDICT

The Diva II SP may look near identical to the more affordable Diva II, but in practice, the SP is streets ahead of its already impressive junior sibling. Greater tonal depth, vastly improved detail retrieval, and an immaculate sense of timing ensure riveting listening.

SUPPLIED BY

Audionut
011-476-9415

e-MAIL

eads@iafrica.com

WEBSITE

www.audionut.co.za

OUR RATING: 84 / 100





Associated Equipment

Ayre A-X7e integrated amplifier
 Sutherland 20/20 phono stage
 Van Den Hul The Frog MC phono cartridge
 Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers
 TeluriumQ Black interlinks and speaker cable

Software

Boz Scaggs - *Memphis* (429 Records LP)
 Suzanne Vega - *Beauty and Crime* (Bluenote Records LP)
 Yello - *Flag* (Music On Vinyl/Fontana LP)
 Focus - *Focus 3* (Music On Vinyl/Red Bullet LP)
 Cowboy Junkies - *Trinity Revisited* (Cooking Vinyl/
 Diverse Records LP)

But by week two, everything had snapped together, and once the Frog had passed the 100 hour mark, the deck, arm and cartridge gelled beautifully.

In broad terms, the SP sounds similar to the Diva II: there is an approachability and an honesty to the performance that instantly draws the listener into the music. But the SP/309 duo sounds

bigger and more expansive, with superior bottom-end delivery and control.

There is real foundation and substance to the music, not only in the lower registers, but across the frequency spectrum. The midrange is smoothly and amply expressed, but with no sign of oversaturation, while the higher frequencies are lucidly rendered, with plenty of bite



and sparkle, and none of the rolled-off 'warmth' some might consider de rigeur with vinyl playback.

Boz Scaggs' *Memphis* showed off the Avid's superb sense of timing, with his laid-back but eloquent guitar work, almost laconic vocals and the set's engaging arrangement presented with verve and believability. On 'Dry Spell', Charlie Musslewhite's basement harmonica had an almost visceral presence, while Keb' Mo's slide Dobro was vivid enough to be right there, in the room with me.

The Diva II SP has a real talent for air and staging, providing plenty of breathing space for the music, while an exceptionally low noise floor and total lack of mechanical noise ensures that the finest sprinkling of detail – especially subtle ambient clues, and incidental effects – are meticulously

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rendered, thus adding to a sense of compelling authenticity.

Can it rock? Those Swiss jesters of Euro-rock, Yello, always provide a good system workout with their densely arranged, holographically produced music, and the Avid was able to deliver the full impact of the massive soundstage, the power rhythms, the soaring vocals and the resonant narratives that make *Flag* one of the classic Yello releases.

Suzanne Vega's atmospheric *Beauty And Crime* can sound boomy on the bottom end and sibilant in the vocal range on anything but a finely tuned deck, but the Avid had no problem keeping things under control. Vega's voice soared over the driving percussion and meaty bass on 'Zephyr', while the guitar was

delivered with presence an intent.

The Avid negotiated the layers of music with both accuracy and cohesion, affording the ethereal background vocals, and incidental nuances as much attention as the primary performers. The result was a rich and expansive sound that had me rifling through my record collection for more musical gratification.

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Yes, there is an underlying honesty to the deck that won't tolerate poor recordings. And some might find its slight aloofness in the upper midrange to lack

the 'warmth' that many consider a default trait of vinyl playback. In that context, the Diva II SP is smooth but neutral, and thus a tonally truthful deck.

There is also no doubt that the Avid Diva II SP represents a big step forward over the Diva II in terms of weight, authority, air and staging. The sheer sense of dimension, of authority and of musical generosity, together with real talent for dynamics and timing, vindicates the extra acquisition cost over the Diva II, while propelling the SP into true high-end territory.

The SME 309 is an excellent companion, as is the Van Den Hul The Frog cartridge, making for a record deck that finds just the right balance between revealing analysis and thrilling musicality.

Deon Schoeman